

**Genea-Break: Reviewing Census Records**  
**10 April 2024 for the Cranberry Genealogy Club**  
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New genealogical researchers are often steered towards exploring decennial U.S. Federal Census records as a starting point. **The typical advice is to begin with the most recently released census and then trace back each decade.** Using [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) provides two nice features for census research. Once you locate a family unit, 1) you can click on each individual member for related records so that 2) you can add to census data by exploring other known records for each individual. Although this is not a perfect method, it saves time and allows beginners to find more than one record quickly.

The best advice I ever received regarding working with **U.S. Federal Census** records was to print out a blank copy of the form for each census year to use for easy reference to column headings. Each census year form reveals a few different pieces of data about individuals. Analysis of multiple census records for the same individual or family helps genealogists to compile a more complete perspective of one's life. Use the links and information on the *United States Census Bureau's* website under "History" to learn what specific data was collected for each census schedule or questionnaire. This information is found here: [http://www.census.gov/history/www/through\\_the\\_decades/questionnaires](http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/questionnaires). Then, on the left menu, click on each decade to access a PDF image of the complete census questionnaire for that year. The most recent census available is from 1950, but the 1960 census will be indexed and made available in 2032, exactly 72 years after it was completed.

Two other good general census guides can be found on [www.FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) using this link: [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Forms](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Forms) or within the "Resources for Genealogists" section of the *National Archives* website using this link: <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>. Sites such as *Cyndi's List* and databases such as *Ancestry.com* also offer links to census forms and an overview of the specific data collected and recorded

Some reminders and hints about using US federal census records include:

- Collect specific location/address data from the header of the census page and along the left margin, coupled with the house number. (Refer to column headings for the house number IF available.)
- Review recorded details across the entire census page. For example, what is each person's relationship to the head of household? If the relationship is listed as "Boarder" or "Lodger", then evaluate whether or not that person might be related!
- Note the location of each individual's birth (state or country). Does the family remain in the same place, move to new places, have the same neighbors, or even share the surname of a neighbor?
- Note occupations, as many trades have guild records . . . an additional resource for your research!
- Some census years listed health (including literacy) or education (years of school completed or current status). These are clues worth noting as they provide unique information about an ancestor.
- The 1900 census listed the number of years married, which along with the ages of children, can bridge the gap back to the 1880 census (since the 1890 census is not available).
- The 1900 census also listed the number of children born to a woman and the number of children who were currently alive. This piece of information often appears as 7/ 5, meaning the woman gave birth to 7 children, but only 5 are alive. Use this information to find birth or death records and fill out the family group.
- Notice the place of birth of each person's father and mother; this is helpful with immigrant ancestors and also with migratory families.
- Look for a column (from 1900 on) about citizenship status; record the year of arrival for immigrant ancestors on two or more census schedules as well as tracking their citizenship status. The three most common abbreviations used were **Pa** for First Papers, **Na** for Naturalized Citizens, and **AI** for those with alien status.
- Watch for both consistencies of census data for your ancestors *and* for inconsistencies. For example, your great-grandmother might list 1883 as her arrival year on the 1900, 1910, and 1920 censuses while her husband, your great- grandfather, offers three distinct years of arrival. One might be mistaken or perhaps they arrived at

different times. They might have traveled back and forth prior to naturalization. There is a kernel of truth in all records, and an error can appear from poor penmanship, forgetfulness, or simply the lack of knowledge of the family member who is informing the census taker. Chart all recorded data, and save for analysis with other records.

If you print out the image of census records, include the source citation with the image. This practice saves time if you need to find the specific record again! For an elusive ancestor, create a time line to trace him or her across the decades by extracting certain data. Then, examine those “visual” facts for consistency or lack thereof. When trying to solve a recent query with a fellow genealogist, for example, I realized that although one certain ancestor disappeared after 1900, the entire rest of his family lived at the exact same address from 1880 through 1940. This type of analysis leads to other records that can bolster one’s research, such as annual city directories, parish or church records, or tax records.

Many states conducted a **State Census** which provides additional or different information than a federal census record, usually in a year ending with a 5 in the United States. First, determine whether or not a state census was taken by referring to a state by state list of recorded censuses and for what years. Two great resources about state census records can be found as follows.

On the “State Censuses” page of the *Census Bureau’s* website, go to this page:

[https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other\\_resources/state\\_censuses.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/genealogy/other_resources/state_censuses.html).

The *FamilySearch Research Wiki* has similar information using this link:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/State\\_Census\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/State_Census_Records).

Next, read about which databases or websites offer free access to state census records. Once you can access the state census records, you can potentially track a family or individual every five years, rather than just once a decade. For example, in the 1940 U.S. Federal Census, there is a column which asks where a family lived in 1935....same address or not. IF ancestors check “different address”, check for a state census that might show movement or a location where additional records might be found.

Additional types of U.S. Census records include territorial censuses (U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, etc.), Colonial censuses ([https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Colonial](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Colonial)), and the Indian Rolls ([https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/American\\_Indian\\_Census\\_Rolls](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/American_Indian_Census_Rolls)), which are different than the U.S. Census Indian Schedules.

**More commonly used are the Federal Non-Population census forms, including:**

Agricultural schedules [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Agricultural\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Agricultural_Schedules)

Defective Schedules [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Defective\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Defective_Schedules)

Special Inquiries [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Special\\_Inquiries\\_Relating\\_to\\_Indian](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Special_Inquiries_Relating_to_Indian)

Institutions [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Institutions](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Institutions)

Manufacturing [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Manufacturing\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Manufacturing_Schedules)

Merchant Seamen [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Merchant\\_Seamen](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Merchant_Seamen)

Military/Naval Forces [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Military\\_and\\_Naval\\_Forces](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Military_and_Naval_Forces)

Mortality Schedules [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Mortality\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Mortality_Schedules)

Slave Schedules [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Slave\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Slave_Schedules)

Social Statistics [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Social\\_Statistics\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Social_Statistics_Schedules)

Veterans Schedules [www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Census\\_Veterans\\_Schedules](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Census_Veterans_Schedules).

We must not forget the numerous countries that have census records available. A great starting point is to return to the *FamilySearch Research Wiki* page “Census Records by Country” and click on a link to explore the options and years available to view. Go to this specific link:

[www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Category:Census\\_records\\_by\\_country](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Category:Census_records_by_country).

Census records offer clues to many aspects of ancestors’ lives that can be collected and analyzed to compile a fuller picture of each individual. These details can reveal facts that will lead to records of births, deaths, marriages, land, occupations, education, immigration, and naturalization. Errors, sloppy handwriting, poor spelling, or even rips and stains might hinder your research on census forms but usually these records provide insight about individuals. Remember to take time to review the column headings when collecting factual data, and use multiple census years to create a time line about your ancestors. Analysis and evaluation of census records can provide more data than expected.

